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ABSTRACT

Metaphor, ethnography, and other qualitative alternatives to the traditional goal-based experimental approach to evaluation have been presented recently. Among the issues associated with the experimental approach are those of preordinate specification and explicit definition. Though the former has received much attention, the latter requires further dialogue. In this paper alternatives to explicit definition are explored, using ideas drawn from art and literature, art history, and aesthetics. Political and social implications of insisting on explicit definition, which are raised in some of the ideas from the arts, are applied to evaluation. The impact of explicit definition on evaluation methodology and reporting is also examined. Using the orientation of the artist, five suggestions are drawn for improving evaluation. They include 1) reflecting ambiguity, 2) challenging political reification, 3) exploring previously elusive variables, 4) enhancing communication, and 5) improving evaluator credibility. (Author/CP)

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The Evaluator as Artist: The Problem of Explicit Definition

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ABSTRACT

In recent years various evaluation models have been presented as alternatives to the traditional goal-based, experimental approach. Among the issues debated are those of preordinate specification and explicit definition. Though the former has received much attention, the latter requires further dialogue. In this paper alternatives to explicit definition are explored, using ideas drawn from art and literature, art history, and aesthetics. Political and social implications of insisting on explicit definition, which are raised in some of the ideas from the arts, are applied to evaluation. The impact of explicit definition on evaluation methodology and reporting is also examined. Using the orientation of the artist, five suggestions are drawn for improving evaluation. They include 1) reflecting ambiguity, 2) challenging political reification, 3) exploring previously elusive variables, 4) enhancing communication, and 5) improving evaluator credibility.

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The Problem of Explicit Definition

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One of the arguments in what Gephart has called the evaluation war (1978) is that between explicit definition and its adversary. How to characterize that adversary presents some problems though. Perhaps the phenomenological multiple reality system is the alternative. But it has been arranged in more direct counterpoint to the positivistic tradition on a philosophical continuum (Guba, 1978a), and explicit definition gets subsumed in the process.

When Stake (1975, 1979), Guba (1978a), Patton (1975, 1978), Wolf (1979), and others speak about the evils of preordinate specification and explicit definition, most of the ink, though not all, it seems is spent on preordinate. The emergence of issues, central to responsive evaluation and to most conceptions of naturalistic inquiry, again places explicit definition in a supportive role, this time on an inquiry design or methodology continuum.

The promotion of metaphor in evaluation perhaps takes the issue on more directly. Edward Kelly (1975), Ortony (1975), Worthen (1978), Guba (1978b), and Nick Smith (1978) have explored the use of metaphor for evaluation. It has been suggested both as a theoretical concept for model building (Worthen, Guba, and Smith), and as a communication device in data gathering and in reporting (Kelly, Ortony).

Perhaps there are other candidates for the alternative to explicit definition. "Implicit" I suppose is the dictionary antonym. But implicit carries a certainty behind it: "capable of being understood from something else though unexpressed" or "being without doubt or reserve: UNQUESTIONING, ABSOLUTE" (Webster, 1973). These uses of implicit contrast with explicit most especially in directness of statement. Thus implicit seems in less direct contrast with the certainty implicit in "definition."

Definition may be the more important half of the term to key on. It is perhaps even more sacred than explicit, but not without skeptics. Richard Hooper, in a discussion of Harold's Pinter's play, "The Homecoming" (1968), has collected an array of indictments of definition, clarity, purpose. Among them is John Cage's delightful statement "The highest purpose is to have no purpose at all." In Hooper's words, "the trouble with overemphasis on clarity and definition is that they imply boundaries, separation, measurement, classification, hard edges. Of course,

in school these are virtues--vide grades, tests galore and lots of separated disciplines." Bob Stake agrees, as in this conversation with the author:

> Seefeldt: I often feel a(n art)work is enduring when its message is not terribly apparent, when it rather opens an arena for conjecture. Does it ever serve the evaluation report to have a similar effect?
>
> Stake: Of course!...there is a very important role for ambiguity of language. And it isn't the necessary track to feel you have to justify it in instrumental terms (i.e., what it will accomplish)....Your report needs to reflect the situation out there. If that situation is ambiguous, it is misrepresenting to give a clear statement. Rather you need to help create some of the case you're reporting, through such things as the dramatic style of the writing. These sorts of non-virtues are valuable for encouraging reader thought, doubt, and concern. But then there's always the risk of driving the reader away. There is already in this business too much dependence on definitive formal statements: how good a teacher is, what text is best, how a child at a certain age learns best, and so forth.
>
> Evaluation should contribute to the diminishment of definition. Definition is an approximation. It's a creation of somebody to represent something. As such definitions aren't sacred.
>
> Seefeldt: The evaluator as obfuscator.
>
> Stake: No, definition helps create obfuscation. It's the evaluator's duty to desanctify it and eliminate the obfuscation that comes from definition. (Seefeldt,1979)

Bertrand Russell expressed similar sentiment against certainty: "The demand for certainty is one which is natural to man, but is nevertheless an intellectual vice" (In Hooper, 1968).

Hooper also places a political perspective on the question:

> Demands for clarity, for neatly parcelled unambiguous ideas, for clear purposes, lead us into the heart of the American social and political dilemma--the dilemma of violence, poverty,

> and race. The Reagans and Raffertys have clear-cut, no-nonsense ideas....But reality--and the enormous and growing complexity of mass technological society--just refuses to respond to much surface clarification.

Michael Apple (1974) has also put definition into a political context. He suggests that jargon laden definition diverts the focus of the public, especially minority and diverse groups, from educational problems relevant to their lives and substitutes institutional priorities or interests of experts. Amitai Etzioni (1964), in an analysis of modern organizations, warns of similar problems regarding goal displacement, citing German sociologist Robert Michaels' work in the early part of this century. Postman and Weingarntner (1969) anticipate similar possibilities in educational systems, applying Norbert Weiner's concept of entropy. In each of these cases the power of the institution to establish definition independently of broader human need creates problems.

In his treatise on aesthetics Herbert Marcuse (1978) emphasized the role of the artist as political revolutionary against such monopoly over definition. "The truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality (i.e., of those who establish it) to define what is real." (p. 9) Marcuse sees the artist's role as iconoclastic in that the artist must break through the definition and form which are placed by an established self-serving system which has become reified. He states "To the degree to which administered human beings today reproduce their own repression and eschew a rupture with the given reality, to this degree revolutionary theory acquires an abstract character. (p. 71) The artist, then, in seeking a new form, an alternative to dominant definition which better represents social needs, will appear abstract in the eyes of those whose conceptual constructs have been structured under the power of the established reality to create definition. In concluding The Aesthetic Dimension (p. 73), Marcuse quotes Horkheimer and Adorno, "All reification is forgetting." In criticizing current evaluation practices, Apple suggests that by focussing on definition derived from institutional perspectives attention is diverted from the real interests of stakeholders.

The artist understands the disabling capacity of explicit definition. Novelist Joseph Heller (1979) has stated that by making a thing explicit you destroy it. Henri Matisse, in his pursuit of a deeper understanding of reality, said "L'exactitude n'est pas la verité." He meant that truth does not lie in the exactly replicated, in the clearly defined appearance of things, but is found elsewhere. "There is an inherent truth which must be disengaged

from the outward appearance of the object to be represented. This is the only truth that matters." (Read 1959, p. 44) Each believes the power of art as truth lies in abstraction, uncertainty, suggestion. Herbert Read, like Marcuse, has suggested that through abstraction the artist is the agent of deeper "archaic instincts," a term similar to Marcuse's "species being" universals. They refer to human concerns which persist across time and place in spite of definitions and depictions of reality by an established order, whether political or aesthetic.

> The artist must prophesy not in the sense that he foretells things to come, but in the sense that he tells his audience, at the risk of their displeasure, the secrets of their own hearts...As spokesman of his community, the secrets he must utter are theirs. The reason why they need him is that no community altogether knows its own heart; and failing in this knowledge a community deceives itself. (Read, p. 285-287)

Michael Polanyi has proposed the concepts of tacit and explicit knowledge (1967) His suggestion that tacit knowledge is a foundation for explicit knowledge leads Apple to observe that

> it may be necessary to reconsider the current emphasis in evaluation on explicit knowledge--an emphasis that can effectively destroy the art of personal knowing that Polanyi argues is the fundamental property of scientific and aesthetic awareness. In our stress on quantifiable achievement we may be negating the very element that makes anything worth knowing. (Apple, p. 25)

Einstein described his thought processis as preceding verbal or other codification. Rendering ideas into verbal definition is distinctly secondary to exploration and discovery and involves a subsequent, separate task. (In Ghiselin, 1955, p. 43) The search process of the traditional evaluator is built upon explicit definition, however, and proceeds from it, in reversal of Einstein's sequence.

Ethnographic techniques have been adapted to evaluation by advocates of change in the evaluation war to remedy this reversal. In the process, a new respect for qualitative data has emerged.

"Yet, there is no area of human inquiry that epitomizes the qualitative more than what artists do when they work," Eisner argues. (1979, p. 190) He suggests that the artist is most naturally comfortable in those realms where explicit definition is not present. He proposes artistic inquiry as the most appropriate analog for qualitative evaluation and adds the challenge of wholistic synthesis--"The result of their work is a qualitative whole" (p. 190)--as further evidence of his point.

The relationship of wholistic integration to definition is speculated upon by several theorists in brain research (Regelski, 1978). Chief among their notions is hemispheric differentiation of types of knowledge. They suggest that wholistic synthesis resides in the right hemisphere with intuitive, metaphorical, and aesthetic activity, while the left hemisphere houses definition with language, mathematical and other explicit symbol systems.

The experience of the artist may then be useful in evaluation in many ways in exploring alternatives to explicit definition. His is the world of personal knowing. He is involved in abstract expression. His challenge is the development of a mode of seeing and depicting which stands against tradition and its monopoly on form and definition. He addresses species being universals which reification has forgotten. The responsibility of the artist is the diminishment of definition, especially as it obfuscates real issues.

Evaluation and educational technology, in their valuing of explicit definition, must rule out art as a discipline of relevance to their fields. In the process, definitions of "art", "subjectivity", and "abstract" must have negative connotations. These definitional agreements thus preemptively discredit the source which might otherwise most effectively influence the field in examining its own assumptions regarding explicit definition. But what if artists were involved more visibly in evaluation dialogue? What concerns about explicit definition might be more salient in the field? What contributions might those familiar with the inexplicit, the abstract, the subjective, or the metaphorical make in eschewing explicit definition? I suggest five areas for consideration. There may be others.

1) To reflect ambiguity, both in the setting and in life generally. Stake has addressed the former. Hamilton et al. tie traditional evaluation in America to a view of society that has an optimistic, constructionist faith in technology, premised on rational certainty. (Hamilton, MacDonald, King, Jenkins, and Parlett, 1977, p. 26) But as that society becomes increasingly pluralistic, faces retrenchment, and explores the side effects of technology,

an ethic of uncertainty, acknowledging the virtue in tentativity and the necessity of compromise, may be necessary. A respect for ambiguity must precede the development of that ethic, and evaluators as observer-analysts of the social setting can model that respect.

2) To challenge political reification. If the concerns represented by such concepts as goal displacement, entropy and reification of the established order are fostered by explicit definition, as Hooper, Apple, and Marcuse suggest, its diminishment may discomfit the forces promoting those patterns. Thus the evaluator may address deeper social needs than definitional limitations allow.

3) To adjust issues/variables selection for inquiry. Whether or not there is a political implication, evaluation has too often functioned like the child hunting a lost coin on the lighted side of the street. Those variables which lend themselves well to explicit definition and operationalization have gotten the most attention, at the expense of those lying in the dark, outside the range of the dominant methodology, or along its outer periphery.

4) To enhance communication. Alternative modes of expression may more closely resemble thought and communication patterns. Ortony, for example, suggests metaphorical expression. He believes it more naturally parallels human perception and comprehension patterns than does the discrete mode of explicit, literal linguistic symbol. Thus removing dependence on explicit definition may enrich dialogue both with informants while gathering data and with audiences while reporting.

By removing claims of certainty, the boundaries of dialogue may expand. Conversants interpreting ambiguity or abstraction may surface issues otherwise suppressed.

5) To improve evaluator credibility with certain audiences. An evaluation product designed in the mode familiar to its audience will command closer attention and fuller receptivity than one designed in an unfamiliar mode. Some audiences harbor values which the technology surrounding explicit definition offends. The technical, scientific report may impress other audiences, but it induces suspicion in these. To the extent that explicit definition contributes to that suspicion, its diminishment may increase the effectiveness of evaluation.

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